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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effect of various intervention contexts on the ability of young children (ages 3 and 4 years) with language impairments to effectively direct communications to a partner and to vary communicative intentions. The six children in the study were either nonverbal or in the early stages of developing verbal communication and all exhibited developmental delays. The children's verbal and nonverbal communications were examined in five contexts: gross motor play, unstructured play, procedural/daily living, object manipulation, and symbolic play. Child productions were videotaped and classified. The study found that context affected frequency of communication, communicative intent, and percent of communications directed to a partner. Specifically, more communications were produced during gross motor play than in the other contexts. Most of these communications were of the behavior regulating type. Unstructured play and object manipulation contexts yielded few directed communications. The procedural context produced the lowest percent of communications. Unstructured play, symbolic play, and object manipulation produced a wider variety of communicative intentions than other contexts. Students were more willing to accept clinical attempts to expand play during the unstructured play context. (DB)

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The Effect of Context on Communicative Intent

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Purpose

Clinicians working with language-impaired children use interactive play activities as the context for language intervention. Previous work by Lougeay and Stillman (1989) showed that the children communicated more when participating in gross motor play and unstructured play than in object manipulation or representational play. Thus, the specific play contexts affected the children's rate of communication. The effect of context on the quality of children's communications, however, remained unclear.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of various intervention contexts on language-impaired children's ability to effectively direct communications to a partner and vary communicative intentions.

Subjects

Six 3 and 4 year olds having an MLU of 1.5 or less were included in this study. All were enrolled in a language intervention program in which intervention occurred within interactive play activities. Three of the children were non-verbal and three were in the early stages of developing verbal communication. All exhibited developmental delays and three exhibited inappropriate social skills.

Procedures

The children's verbal and non-verbal communications were examined in five contexts:

1. Gross Motor Play
   (i.e. gym activities, play ground)
2. Unstructured Play
   (i.e. sandbox, water play, play dough)
3. Procedural/Daily Living
   (i.e. dressing, grooming, cooking)
4. Object Manipulation
   (i.e. blocks, stacking toys, shape sorter)
5. Symbolic Play
   (i.e. Pretend play with dolls, dishes or cars)

The contexts were selected because they were judged by the clinicians to be situations in which the children experienced success in communicating. Three interactive play episodes (totalling 15 minutes) in each context were videotaped from daily program activities for each child. Child productions were classified using the following categories:

Behavioral Regulation (BR)
requests

Joint Attention (JA)
attempts to establish joint reference with the clinician

Reject (R)
intentional rejection of the clinician's communication

Answer (A)
attempts to acknowledge a communication

Copy (C)
any direct imitation of the clinician's communication

Communications which could not be classified were not included.

Each communication was also coded as directed (the child is focused on the clinician) or non-directed (the communications are not directed to the clinician.)

Table 1
% Total Communications In Each Context

Gross Motor	29.1
Unstructured Play	22.3
Procedural	5.8
Object Manipulation	23.9
Symbolic Play	19.3

Table 1 shows that gross motor play provided the most communications followed by object manipulation and unstructured play. The children communicated less frequently during symbolic play and procedural activities.

Table 2
% Intentions Used In Each Context

	BR	JA	R	A	C
Gross Motor	70.1	15.2	6.1	6.1	2.0
Unstructured Play	40.8	27.6	5.3	26.3	0
Procedural	20.0	45.0	0	0	35
Object Manipulation	29.8	17.9	22.6	20.2	9.5
Symbolic Play	20.9	29.9	17.9	20.9	10.4

Table 2 shows that during Gross Motor play most communications were Behavior Regulators (BR). The percentage of Joint Attention Communications (JA) was greatest during procedural play. However, there were relatively few communications in this context (Table 1). A high percentage of rejects occurred during Object Manipulation and Symbolic Play. Communications during Unstructured Play, Object Manipulation, and Symbolic Play were more evenly distributed across intentions than in the other contexts.

Table 3
% Directed Communications

Gross Motor	75.5
Unstructured Play	36.8
Procedural	55.5
Object Manipulation	26.2
Symbolic Play	46.7

Gross motor play and procedural yielded the highest percentages of directed communications. Symbolic and unstructured play resulted in fewer directed communications. Directed communications were seldom observed during object manipulation.

Conclusions

Context does affect frequency of communication, communicative intent, and % of communications directed to a partner. Specifically, more communications were produced during gross motor play than in the other contexts. Gross motor play also yielded the highest frequency of communications directed to the clinician. The majority of communications within this context were behavioral regulators. Clearly the children were motivated to request assistance and direct the clinicians actions during gross motor play.

Unstructured play and object manipulation yielded few directed communications. These contexts appear to encourage individual effort rather than interactive play.

Procedural produced the lowest % of communications. Observation of the videotaped interactions revealed that children completing procedures focused on the procedure itself and were not motivated to communicate about it.

Unstructured play, symbolic play and object manipulation produced a wider variety of communicative intentions than did the other contexts. A relatively high % of the communications were rejects. Observation of the interactions revealed that many of the communications produced were part of previously established routines related to the objects used in those contexts. The children rejected the clinician's attempts to vary those routines. In unstructured play, however, communications produced were novel and the children did not reject clinicians attempts to expand their play. They seemed more willing to accept information from the clinician during unstructured play.

The results suggest that clinicians should consider context as it relates to intervention goals. Children who have difficulty directing communications will experience more success during gross motor play. This context will also facilitate a greater frequency of communicative attempts. Intervention for children using a limited number of communicative intents will be best accomplished during contexts other than gross motor play.

Reference

Lougeay, J. and Stillman R. (1989) Effect of Context on Language Impaired Children's Performance. Paper presented at the annual convention of the American Speech-Language Hearing Association, St. Louis, Missouri, November, 1989.